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ABSTRACT

This speech discusses problems that principals face in trying to implement effective school strategies, describes ongoing research in instructional management, and identifies school improvement strategies used by particularly effective principals. The first section addresses practical problems in finding the appropriate balance between high expectations and student differences, between basic skills and higher-order cognitive needs, and between strong programmatic leadership and teacher autonomy. The second section describes models for principal behavior generated from research in the Instructional Management Program at Far West Laboratory. These include the "master teacher mode" based on clinical supervision and an equally effective approach based on indirect management. The final section identifies common traits of effective principals, including visibility, systematic time management, and a clear conception of effective instruction--instruction that is based on such key features as time on task, class size and composition characteristics, task and activity structures, curriculum pacing and sequencing, and evaluation. (TE)

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ISSUES FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

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Perhaps one of the most important roles in creating effective schools is that of the school principal. Research has shown that the instructional leadership provided by the building administrator is a key ingredient in school improvement. But many principals are unsure of the most productive ways of exercising their leadership function. Many have turned to the work of the effective school studies--research by Wilbur Brookover, Larry Lezotte, the late Ron Edmonds and others--for indications of characteristics of effective schools. This body of work has identified the characteristics of successful schools.

Successful schools emphasize basic skills. In these schools students exhibit high levels of time on task. The teachers and the principals set high expectations for all students. There is a system of clear instructional objectives. Student progress is monitored frequently to make sure that proper learning environments are created and that students are actually attaining the learning objectives. There is a positive school and classroom climate, and the schools seem to be free from disruption. Also in these schools the old maxim, "effective school, effective principal," seems to ring true.

Effective principals are strong, programmatic leaders who know their teachers' problems and effectively allocate resources to improve classroom instruction. These principals set high academic standards; they maintain student discipline, frequently visit classrooms, and observe teaching. All this sounds like common sense, yet when you think about putting these things into practice in your schools, you will probably find gaps in the research and practice knowledge. The suggestions that come from the effective schools research have a lot of problems both in terms of the research evidence and the practical suggestions for improving instruction in schools.

First, I'd like to discuss some of the problems principals face in trying to implement effective school strategies. Then, I'd like to share with you some of the research that has been going on at Far West Laboratory in the Instructional Management Program. Finally, I will identify some strategies that particularly effective principals have used to improve their schools.

EA 017 106

Some Practical Problems for Principals

Let's go back to some of the characteristics that are claimed to typify effective schools. The research says that effective schools have high expectations for their students. How high? Should you set expectations at grade level, above grade level, a little bit below grade level? We know that children have different learning needs, and in fact, many studies have indicated that by setting academic standards too high teachers may actually frustrate many children and depress motivation. So there is a practical problem that teachers and administrators face when they are trying to exercise their leadership role in setting standards. Unfortunately research and practice really set no clear guidelines for how high those expectations should be.

Another characteristic of effective schools is that they seem to emphasize the basic skills. Again, a practical problem--how much of your school program should be devoted to basic skills instruction? Should it be 50%, 75%, 100%? There is no clear recipe for defining the appropriate combination of basic skills and other types of activities within a classroom or school. And in fact, there is some evidence--particularly in the area of math reasoning--that an over-reliance on basic skills instruction especially in simple numeracy skills, actually depresses math reasoning. Some of the latest work in cognitive psychology points out that higher-order cognitive skill training can go hand in hand with basic numeracy instruction. I think there is a challenge here for principals and teachers in thinking about the instructional system: what balance of basic skills and higher-order cognitive skills do you really need?

One of the problems in the effective schools research that many principals have expressed to me is a notion that the research presents a dilemma. Many legislatures and school boards are telling principals to be strong, programmatic leaders. But the same research from which this prescription derives also says that effective schools grant maximum autonomy to the classroom teacher. How can you be a strong, programmatic leader and grant maximum autonomy? Clearly there is a balance that needs to be worked out. Many principals that I have been working with have agreed that they should be in the classrooms frequently. Yet they have problems with how to exercise instructional leadership when they have a highly professionalized staff.

My point here is that the research and practice base for effective schools has not yet provided a solid set of prescriptions for school improvement. In fact, there are too many practical problems left unanswered, and I think it is a challenge for you as educators to try to deal with these and not to accept the recommendations that come out of the effective schools research as prescriptions or recipes for your schools.

The Research Contribution: Profiles of Effective Principals

During the last three years at Far West Lab, my colleagues and I in the Instructional Management Program have been trying to attach some answers to those questions. We are far from getting to a place where there are distinct prescriptions. But, what I'd like to share with you today are some of the aspects of effective instructional leadership that have derived from our studies of nearly 20 successful principals from urban, suburban and rural districts throughout the Western States.

First, we found that there was no single formula for the effective principal. In fact, the men and women we studied used very unique and often quite varied techniques for exercising their leadership within the school. There are very important contextual factors such as the composition of the teaching staff, the student body, the community, the district situation, state mandates and the principal's own past experience that seem to shape how the principals accomplish their role (Figure 1).

I'd like to share with you a couple of the models that were generated from the research that we've done with these principals. The way we have worked with principals has been to engage them as collaborators in field research. We use a process of shadowing in which principals are followed by research interns, and their behavior is described. Then through a reflective interview process that occurs over several weeks, and in some cases over an entire school year, we develop models that represent the principals' behavior. The principals like this because many of them have few opportunities to reflect on their own behavior and appreciate having a non-evaluative "pair of eyes" feeding back information about their activities.

The principal in Figure 2 represents the master teacher mode. In his instructional management role, he spent more than half of every day in classrooms working with teachers and pupils in demonstration lessons. He had a very large elementary school, around 850 students. The school is in a suburban community that has a very low socio-economic status and nearly half the teachers were new teachers. He had an assistant principal and was able to rearrange his schedule in such a way that he could spend a large proportion of his time in classrooms. He had a clear conception of the direction he wanted to attain in the school and created an instructional management system that routinely involved issues of planning, monitoring student performance, staff evaluation, staffing, and involving the staff in the personal and learning needs of the students. One thing that was fascinating about this principal--and you can see it in the diagram--is that he didn't separate the notion of school climate from the instructional organization within the school. In other words, whenever he tried to change a climate dimension, for example students' perceptions of themselves or aspirations, he always followed it up with a change in the instructional system. He was convinced that if

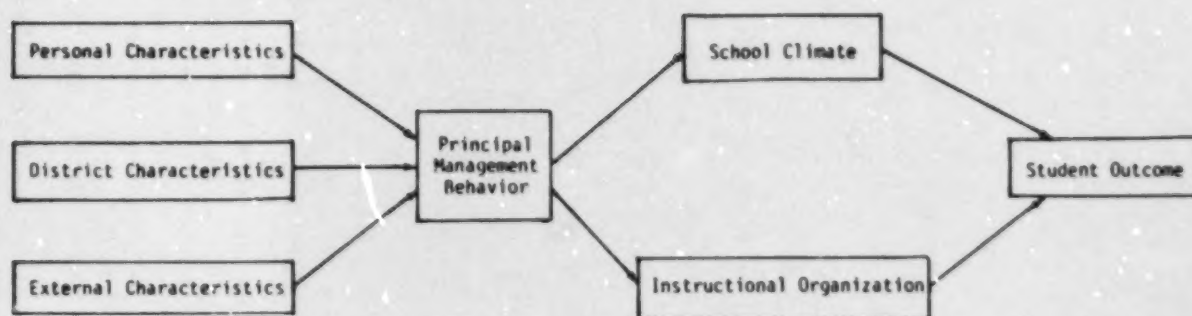


Figure 1: A Framework for Examining Instructional Management

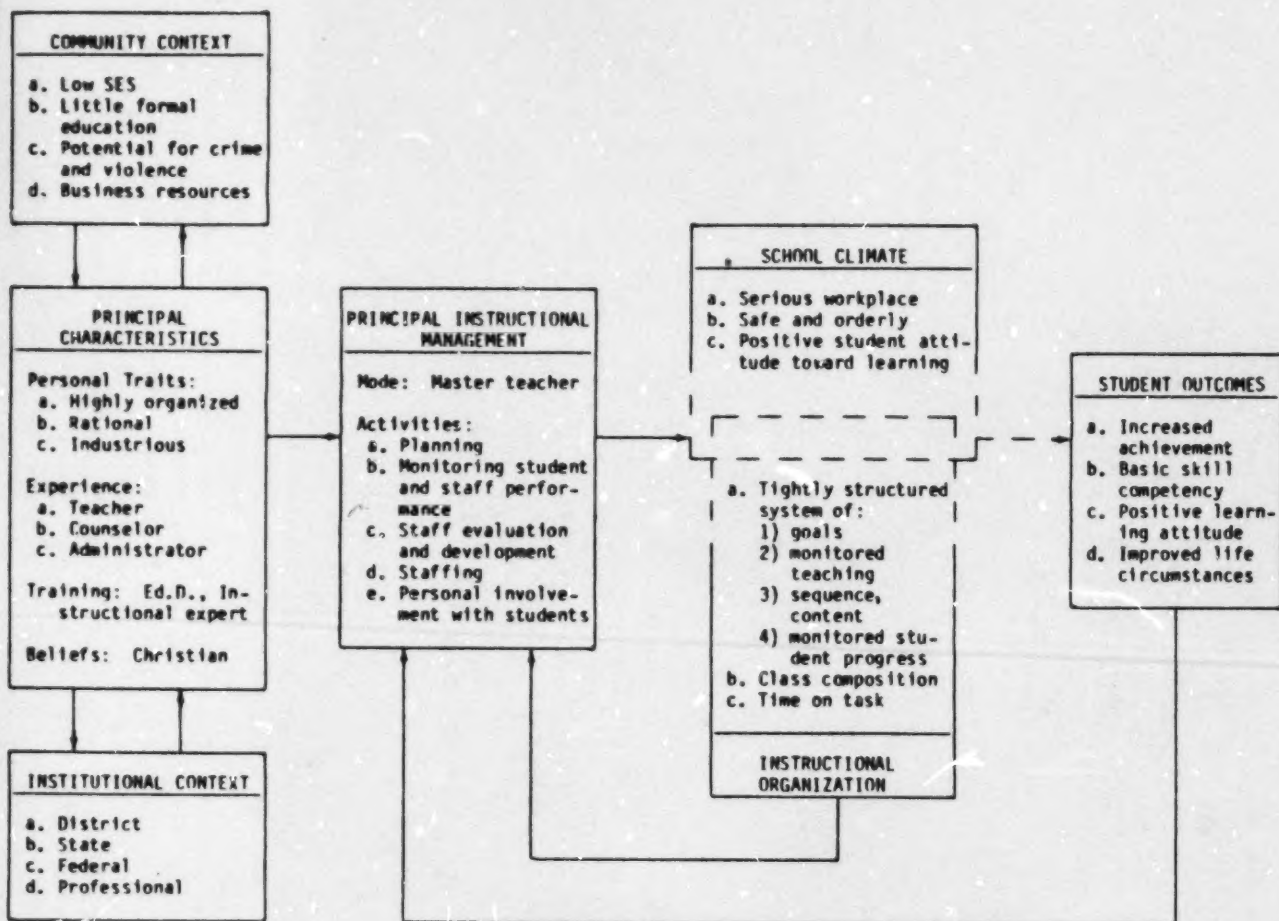


Figure 2: Instructional Management Model - Harold Mann, Field Elementary School

you raised expectations but didn't provide the opportunity for children to demonstrate and practice skills that would allow them to attain those expectations, their motivations would go down. This would lead to a demoralized staff and a demoralized student body. So he always linked changes in the school climate to change within the classrooms in the school. This principal had clear objectives. When we looked at test scores in the school, despite the low socioeconomic climate and despite a high turnover rate within the community, the children had rising test scores in reading and math. So it is a very successful school and a very successful principal, held in high esteem by colleagues and by teachers. This principal, in my mind, exemplifies the ideal characteristics that come out of the effective schools research.

Let's examine another principal (Figure 3). This principal spent very little time in the classroom. We characterized his management behavior as primarily indirect. He operated his school by planting an idea with the appropriate teacher and nurturing that idea and watching it spread throughout the school. He had a five year plan to improve instruction, but in the six months that we observed him, he spent a total of an hour and a half doing practice lessons with teachers. He does not follow the clinical supervisor model at all. Another interesting characteristic of this principal was that this man felt that the school climate had to be put in order first, that kids had to be involved in a learning environment school-wide that emphasized achievement, personal merit and self direction. He also felt that the safety of the school was important. Again this is a reasonably large, suburban, elementary school with about 740 children, situated in a depressed economic area. The school itself was in a state of disrepair because of lack of funding. The principal felt that the image of the school had to be promoted by creating a safe and nurturing environment for the children, and only then could he start to make changes in the instructional organization of the school.

These are examples of two different leadership techniques in almost identical schools with students from similar backgrounds. And both schools are equally successful. What made the difference? Well, one key difference in these two schools was that the principal in Figure 3 had no teachers with less than five years of experience. He had a staff which had been at the school over 10 years. The first principal (Figure 2), who was the master teacher, had more than half of his staff as new teachers that year. This makes a very different context for the exercise of instructional leadership. And instructional leadership behavior is contingent upon the context in which the principal operates. We followed this principal (Figure 3) informally the next year to a new school that had about half the staff as new teachers. He then began over the course of the year to look more like the principal in Figure 2. In other words, he had to do much more clinical supervision. He couldn't rely on planting a seed with a key teacher and having it diffuse throughout the school.

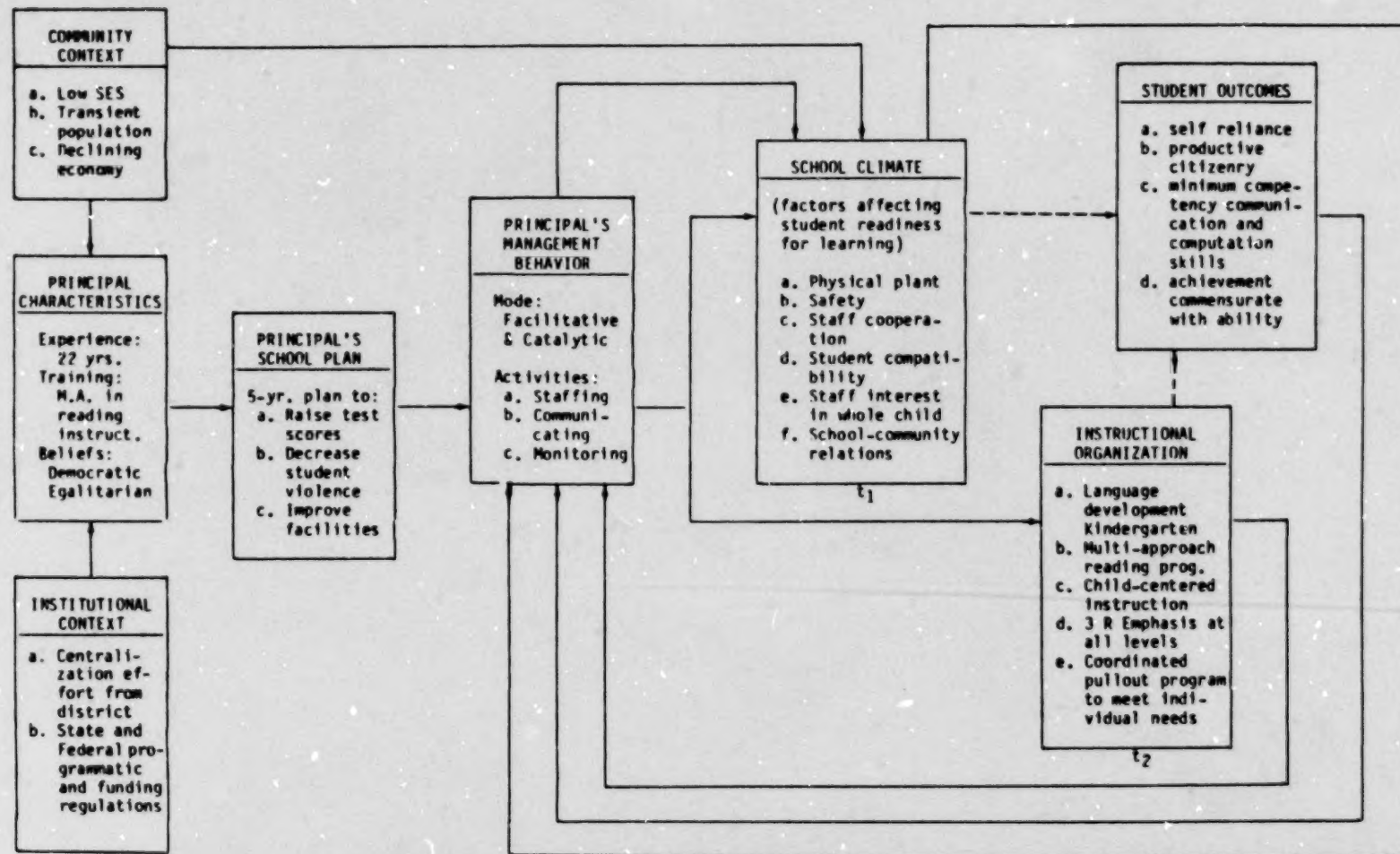


Figure 3: Instructional Management Model - Jeffrey Hudson, McDuffy Elementary School

Instructional Leadership Strategies of Effective Principals

Although different schools seem to require different leadership techniques, we did find some strong commonalities among the principals that we've studied. For example, we found that these successful principals were very active in their schools. The observers who were the shadows for these principals almost had to wear track shoes to keep up with the principals as they moved throughout the school. They were highly visible. A very common technique that these principals used involved getting in touch with kids as they entered the building. For example, the principals commonly met the school buses, and as the kids would come off the bus or as they would walk in the school, they would look at their faces. It was surprising how often the principal could anticipate problems within the school on the basis of how the kids came into school.

Another thing about these principals was that they were very systematic in their behavior and systematic about moving through the school. As we cataloged their behavior, every one of these successful principals visited every subsetting within the school--library, hallways, recess, lunch--every day or every two days. In fact one of our principals was so systematic that he had a little matrix of his school on a three by five card. He checked it off as he touched base with different people.

These are two key aspects of their instructional leadership role, but perhaps the most striking characteristic of these successful principals was their conception of instruction. All of them had a clear conception of effective instruction, and this conception guided their decisions throughout the day and throughout the year. Every decision, policy, practice within their schools was linked to improving the learning opportunities of children. They were truly concerned with quality instruction, and it was manifested in even the mundane tasks that principals engage in--from scheduling school assemblies, to collecting milk money, to dealing with disruptive students. These principals always ask themselves, "How will my decision affect the children?" We found that less effective principals often ask this same question. But the truly effective principals--the most successful ones that we've observed--could describe their strategies and actions in terms of solid principles of good instruction. They could tie it back to key features of effective instructional practice.

In our interviews and observations of these principals, we found that their models of good instruction are really quite consistent with the work that's beginning to emerge from the last five years of effective teaching research. Although the principals did not use these terms, they seemed to describe the instructional system in their schools along the six dimensions or six factors that are seen as important for constructing an instructional program at the classroom level and at the school level. One of the most important is time on task. These principals understood the conception of time on

task. Time simply didn't mean allocating time for instruction, it meant making sure that kids were engaged in the instructional activity and that they were successful at the instructional activity. All too often we look at classrooms in terms of engaged time and forget the kids may be working on tasks they can never accomplish. I was amazed when I looked through old curriculum development texts, even some of those written within the last five years, that have postulated that children should have about a 70% success rate. In other words, on their worksheets, tests, and the like, they should fail about 30% of the time. But there is a growing amount of evidence that success rates around 90% to 95% are the best. They move kids ahead rapidly. So, time on task is not simply a matter of getting enough time; it's using it in quality manner.

Class size and composition are important factors. Most of you probably are aware that class size alone is not a good predictor of student achievement. But these principals use size in various ways to construct classrooms that were appropriate to given activities and given tasks. At the elementary level the difference between 25 and 28 children in a classroom probably would not make a big achievement difference. It may help teachers to overcome some behavior problems, but it probably will not have a demonstrated effect on student achievement. However, for particular aspects of instruction and for children with particular reading or mathematics problems, smaller groups are appropriate. In the successful schools we saw a lot of cross-grade, flexible grouping for particular instructional objectives. The teachers were important in constructing this, but the principals in these schools played a key role in monitoring the curriculum and making sure that the experiences were high quality and well-articulated with the overall goals of the school. In other words, the instructional leadership role of the principal was to tie the different groupings together. Grouping practices within the schools seemed very important--from tracking at the high school level to in-class grouping at the elementary level. The principals were involved in helping teachers develop strategies for effective group management.

There seems to be a growing sense in education today that the techniques of direct instruction, whole class teaching, or active teaching are better for teaching the basic skills than small group instruction. Well, that may be true. But we found that an overuse of direct instruction in the classroom seems to depress higher-order cognitive skills. All the successful principals that we've encountered are grappling with the problem of how to provide good solid basic skills instruction and also provide opportunities for children to acquire these higher order cognitive skills.

In addition to grouping, another characteristic, the activity or task structure within the school, seems to be an important realm for good instructional leadership. Often times in the elementary level, when teachers work within grade teams, the overall structure of the curriculum within the school can get lost. Let me give you an

example. A number of years ago, I was working with a school that had as a primary goal the creation of self-directed learners. They wanted the children who left in 6th grade to have some skills that would allow them to enter the curriculum of a junior high, make good decisions and be self-motivated and self-directed learners. But the junior high school teachers complained that the students from that school were really very dependent learners. We analyzed the instructional program in the school and found that each grade level had very good instructional materials. We also found that in kindergarten through the end of third grade the students experienced a lot of choice in their instructional activities. They often chose the time in which to work certain activities and had the responsibility to get their materials completed. By fifth and sixth grade, the teachers were primarily using worksheets and simple cognitive tasks, recitation and the like. The students had almost no chance to exercise the self-directed learning skills that they picked up in the early grades. The principal would be the key person in this school to help articulate the curriculum and the school goals across all grade levels. We found this to be true in the twenty successful schools that we've been studying. These principals played the key role in the articulation of the curriculum and linking the school-wide objectives to the particular learning experiences that children have in those schools.

These successful principals also were concerned with other factors that typify effective instruction--things like the pacing and sequencing of instruction within the classroom. At the elementary level, the number of new words per day introduced in the reading lesson can vary from 1.8 new words a day to 5.6 new words a day. In correlating the achievement gains of the children, there seems to be some evidence that children who encounter 5.6 new words a day achieve at a much higher rate. Their achievement gains are significantly higher than children who receive only 1.8 new words a day. The more exposure, the better. Looking back to time on task, there is good evidence to indicate that as you increase time on task you also have to increase material density or kids get bored.

Many teachers and principals don't realize the intertwining of different effects in the instructional system within the school. The effective principals that we've been studying, as well as the effective teachers that we've worked with over the last five or six years, seem to understand how these different factors intertwine to shape the instructional system. And these successful principals have played an active role in facilitating good learning opportunities along these dimensions.

The last dimension that seems to be of central concern to these instructional leaders is the evaluation system within the school. One of the key features of good instruction seems to be prompt feedback to students. And, all too often as we've observed in many classrooms, the quality of materials is good, the quality of interaction between teacher and pupils is good, but when homework is

assigned or when class assignments are given, there is often too big of a lag between the feedback the children get and their actual performance on the task. What we've found in looking at these successful principals is that many of them have created school-wide standards for evaluation. For example, in several of the schools there is a school-wide homework policy. Part of that policy mandates timely feedback to students, and the principal is actively engaged in monitoring the quality as well as the timeliness of teachers' responses to students. At the secondary level, the principal's instructional leadership role may be in monitoring department chairmen who are actively involved in the evaluation system within their department. But in all cases we've found that the principals have been active in establishing clear standards for the evaluation of teachers and pupils.

When I work with principals in groups of 25 to 50 we often spend a half day to a day talking about the instructional systems in their schools and developing profiles like the two I have shared with you. Principals often don't have the opportunity to reflect on their instructional leadership roles in the school and the various factors that shape what they can do and how they can accomplish their goals. We've just begun to work with a number of principals in Sacramento and in Salt Lake City to teach shadowing and reflective interview techniques so that peers can observe each other, interview each other and help construct their own models that help for school improvement. We find this is a useful staff development task.

Summary

I'd like to summarize a couple of issues. In our study of effective principals we find that there is no single way for a principal to exercise instructional leadership. Everyone cannot be a master teacher, and not every school should have a high amount of clinical supervision. Sometimes it's not possible and many times it's not desirable, depending on the type of student body and the type of staffing characteristics.

But it is clear that successful principals have a solid conception of good instruction and that their conception revolves around the six or seven key features of instruction that I talked about: time on task, class size and composition characteristics, the task and activity structures in school, curriculum pacing and sequencing, and evaluation. These are key factors that all of these principals have addressed in terms of their general school-wide programs.

The other striking thing about these principals is that they use very mundane actions as the opportunity to express their instructional goals and foster excellence within their school. So if there is a punchline for my talk today, it's something like this: Instructional leadership does not necessarily mean doing something new, but perhaps it means doing things in a new way. Most of you have the

elements of effective schools already present in your schools, and instructional leadership, then means knowing how to put them together into a school-wide program that ensures positive learning experiences for all children.